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Developing a Positive Environment for Teacher Quality

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Introduction

This Issues Brief focuses on the key role of teachers in quality education, examines the characteristics of effective and motivated teachers, and outlines a positive environment to encourage teacher quality. According to much current research and program experience, the most important of the many interdependent factors in establishing good quality of education is the quality of teachers (ADEA 2002; Boyle et al. 2003; Lewin and Stuart 2003; USAID 2002). “Quality of teachers” has various definitions as contexts differ, but most would agree that the essential characteristic of good quality teachers is that their students learn academically and grow personally in the ways identified as desirable in a particular society and in the curriculum.

What Are the Characteristics of an Effective and Motivated Teacher?

Whatever other worthwhile results are achieved because of teachers’ work, teacher effectiveness is most commonly expressed in terms of students’ academic achievement, something that is more easily (and less expensively) measured than some of the other essential outcomes of good education. Although there are obvious problems in focusing on academic achievement as the sole indicator of teacher effectiveness, the complex of factors that define effective teaching usually contribute strongly to an increase in student academic achievement (if examinations reflect teaching/learning policies and processes) in addition to increases in other desired skills and behaviors.

Since teachers’ characteristics and skills are key factors in determining education quality, it is worth trying to outline what the characteristics of an effective and good quality teacher might be, although it is essential that such characteristics be locally defined. Dialogue at national, district, school, and community levels should determine the qualities that a specific education system seeks in good teachers. A list of generally held perspectives on good teachers would probably include many of the following (Craig et al. 1998; Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 1995; Fenstermacher and Richardson 2000; Lieberman 1995; Tatto 2000):

- Sufficient knowledge of subject matter to teach with confidence;
- Knowledge and skills in a range of appropriate and varied teaching methodologies;
- Knowledge of the language of instruction;
- Knowledge of, sensitivity to, and interest in the young learner;
- Ability to reflect on their teaching practice and children’s responses;
- Ability to make changes in teaching/learning approaches as a result of reflection;
- Ability to create and sustain an effective learning environment;
- Understanding of the curriculum and its purposes, particularly when reform programs and new paradigms of teaching and learning are introduced;

- General professionalism, good morale, and dedication to the goals of teaching;
- Ability to communicate effectively;
- Enthusiasm for learning that can be communicated to students;
- Interest in students as individuals, sense of caring and responsibility for helping them learn and become good people, and a sense of compassion;
- Good character, sense of ethics, and personal discipline; and
- Ability to work with others and to build good relationships within the school and community.

Although the above list sketches a challenging range of professional and personal attributes, without a prevalence of these characteristics in teachers, there is little hope of reaching the goals of most education systems. This includes increasing access, retention and success of students in school, increasing student learning, encouraging the use of higher-order thinking skills, stimulating self-knowledge and commitment to community, and preparing young people for productive lives or further stages of education.

Teaching as a Social Activity

Although the qualities listed above are needed in each individual teacher, teaching (like learning) is not practiced most effectively as an individual activity. The teacher is always functioning as part of a social network, either with his or her students or within the school community. Effective school leadership and the creation of a positive “school climate” are essential in bringing out the individual and communal characteristics essential in a school of good quality. The point here is that real excellence takes more than an individual excellent teacher or even a collection of individual excellent teachers. A strong school community and strong school leadership are of overriding importance in bringing teachers together to achieve good quality of teaching and learning as individuals, but more importantly, as a community of learning at the school level.

Developing a Positive Environment for Teacher Quality

A literature-based study by Craig, Kraft and duPlessis (1998) outlined twelve features of effective teaching that are identified as most closely associated with the practice of effective teachers working within an enabling school environment. These features reflect the classrooms of effective teachers; they should be included in teacher education programs and supported in the larger education system. The list below follows the outline in the Craig, Kraft and duPlessis study, with material added from other sources. It can provide a useful framework for planners, teachers, and school leaders to stimulate thinking about strategies for achieving improved teacher quality.

- ***Capable teaching force***
Characteristics of capable teachers start with the following: (i) good knowledge of subject matter, (ii) length of time in teaching, (iii) length of time in a single school, and (iv) full-time teaching. With these characteristics as a base, capable teachers must also be able to reflect on their practice, react with flexibility and sensitivity in response to different

teaching/learning situations, and feel pride in their profession. Teacher professionalism implies responsibility and accountability. It is further affected by the status of teachers in the society, general conditions of service, working and living conditions for teachers, and promotion and compensation policies (Craig et al. 1998 p. 13; Darling-Hammond and MacLaughlin 1995).

- ***Ongoing professional development***

Ongoing professional development has not been emphasized until recently. Traditionally emphasis has been put on preservice programs with very little attention or budget devoted to inservice professional development. Well-organized and supported school-based and cluster staff development activities are recently proving to be very effective. The results of effective inservice programs that have been reported are changed attitudes and behaviors and new skills and strategies that teachers use in the classroom (Craig et al. 1998, p. 13). Support for teachers also comes in the form of good policies and efficient administration at the school and central levels that are responsive to the needs of teachers and help them do their jobs. Schools and teachers cannot function efficiently without this kind of support (Cummings 1997; Williams 1997).

- ***Professionalism and positive teacher attitudes***

Good professional identity, confidence, concern for students, and cooperation among teachers have been shown to be essential in the development of positive teacher attitudes. These characteristics are reflected in the teachers' level of effort, confidence in using learning materials and in trying new ideas, low teacher absenteeism and tardiness, and a high level of group involvement in planning teaching and in resolving whole-school issues. School-based and cluster inservice programs have been shown to play a strong role in developing positive teacher attitudes, morale and professional identity (ADEA 2004; Craig et al. 1998, p. 13; LeCzel 2004).

- ***Time and efficiency***

The length of time students spend studying has an important effect on learning and achievement. Not surprisingly, research indicates that students who spend more time in school tend to learn more. Effective teachers manage their classes so that there is less class time wasted in starting and ending learning activities. They select methodologies and use materials that are appropriate to student abilities. They emphasize academic instruction combined with active learning strategies. Effective teachers provide immediate constructive feedback to students, extra support for less able students, and extra challenge for more able students (Craig et al. 1998, p. 14)

- ***Classroom management***

Good quality schools with good student achievement provide safe environments that are orderly, conducive to learning, clean and in good repair, with the order of the school environment being a responsibility of students and staff through cooperative work. School and classroom rules must be fair and equitably applied, agreed upon by both teachers and students. Positive behavior is reinforced, and students and teachers attend classes regularly according to an established timetable (Craig et al. 1998, p. 14; Lockheed and Verspoor 1991).

- ***High expectation***

High expectations play a critical role in student motivation, confidence, and success. There is strong evidence that a school environment and teachers who communicate the expectation that all students can and will do well contribute strongly to positive and effective teaching and learning. There is a tendency in many schools for teachers to communicate low expectations, particularly in the case of female students. Newly industrialized Asian nations provide good examples of the importance of school cultures that set high standards for learning and expect students to achieve them (Craig et al. 1998, pp. 14-15).

- ***Student-teacher interactions***

Effective teachers care about their students, but large classes, students with special needs, and the daily requirements of classroom “survival” can cause frustration, even vindictiveness, in the most caring teacher. Effective teachers pay special attention to students’ interests, problems and accomplishments. They encourage students to develop creativity and use higher-order thinking skills, and to develop responsibility and self-reliance, combined with a commitment to collaboration and communal learning (Craig et al. 1998, p. 15; Pasigna 1997). Whole-class instruction and teacher-centered methodologies, although necessary in some cases because of very large class sizes and minimal resources, can and should be used in ways that encourage students to be intellectually active rather than simply memorize facts. Worthy of exploration are the accomplishments of schools in which students are given exceptional levels of responsibility and, in fact, democratically administer much of what goes on in the school. Examples of such schools are the NEU schools in Guatemala and the *Escuela Nueva* in Colombia (Chesterfield and Rubio 1997).

- ***Curriculum and learning materials***

High quality teaching and learning involves the use of a well-organized curriculum that emphasizes the acquisition of basic skills, encourages students to think critically and use higher-order thinking skills, and develops positive social attitudes in students. Learning objectives should be well defined and teachers should have a range of strategies and materials that help their students reach these objectives. Curriculum and learning materials should be adopted to student needs and teachers should have sufficient flexibility in timetables to ensure that students have understood material before moving on to the next topic, something that teachers rarely can do because of overloaded curriculum and the need to “cover” all material for the purpose of examinations (Craig et al. 1998, p. 16; Dalin et al. 1992; Lockheed and Verspoor 1991).

- ***Clear and focused lessons***

Lessons frequently have no clear structure. Particularly when the material is difficult, this may result in no learning at all for the students. In addition, teachers often know only one approach to structuring a lesson. They should have a variety of possible structures and apply the one that most closely fits the purpose of the lesson and the abilities of their students. An essential point is that structure is important, but rigidity should be avoided.

This is an important task for the preservice preparation and inservice professional development of teachers (Craig et al. 1998, p 17).

- ***Frequent monitoring and assessment***

Monitoring of progress for the purpose of feedback to students is a very important aspect of student motivation. Continuous assessment also provides an essential diagnostic tool for teachers to assess whether or not students are learning. It also enables teachers to provide support for students who are falling behind (Craig et al. 1998, p. 18; du Plessis et al. 2002).

- ***Variety in teaching strategies***

Teachers should know a range of practices to accommodate the differences in students' learning needs. In most countries teachers are encouraged to go beyond memorization and venture into various active learning approaches such as creative problem solving and the use of higher-order thinking skills. This calls for the use of teaching strategies that go far beyond the traditional rote learning, teacher-centered, chalk-and-talk approaches. Research indicates that students exposed to a variety of learning experiences and approaches work more independently, ask more questions, are more verbal, are more skilled at communal or social learning, and have higher academic achievement (Chesterfield and Rubio 1997; Craig et al. 1998, p. 18).

- ***Student reward and incentive system***

There is overwhelming evidence that support and remediation, rather than punishment for poor achievement, is most likely to lead to better results. Sarcasm, labeling, ignoring students who have performed badly and grouping by intelligence should never be practiced. Rewards to groups and to the whole school for achievement are also important (Craig et al. 1998, p. 19).

The Role of Process in Fostering Teacher Quality

The features listed and discussed above that are associated with effective teaching form a critical framework for consideration in planning and implementing programs of support for teachers at all stages of their professional development. It is clear that there is a heavy emphasis throughout this list on "process." The word process, in this context, indicates the development of new knowledge and skills among teachers through interaction, practice, analysis, reflection, and communal problem solving based primarily on an *authentic* situation, that is, the school. It suggests the antithesis of the one-way transmission of knowledge approach in encouraging changed practice. Process in teacher development suggests, rather, a cyclical reflective learning process of combining new knowledge with teachers' existing knowledge which leads to the production of new knowledge, new awareness, internalization of process, and improvement of practice.

This suggests continuous cycles of dialogue, reflection, and practice as a way of achieving change and improving quality. The notion of cycles of dialogue and practice is familiar, for example, from action research (Kemmis and McTaggart 1990) or from notions of experiential

learning (Knowles 1978). Research from a large variety of countries suggests that this is a concept being put into practice within many systems (Lieberman 1995; Sugrue and Day 2002).

Craig et al. (1998) emphasize continuous cycles of dialogue in another way. The main theme of their work is that effective teacher professional development does not happen at one or two times in a teacher's career. Effective professional development is a process that runs along a continuum that extends throughout a teacher's career. Different kinds of professional development and support are needed at different stages of this continuum from preservice programs for students preparing to become teachers, to mentoring and inservice support for new teachers in the first years of practice, to continuing inservice for experienced and all other teachers and school leaders to introduce and explore new teaching ideas, new practice, and the changing role of education as systems evolve.

Many researchers argue that the education, preparation and support that teachers receive (preservice and inservice) make a significant impact on the quality of teaching and on students' learning and therefore warrants careful attention in planning and implementation and in the priorities given in the allocation of funds (Boyd et al. 2003; Craig et al. 1998; Glewwe et al. 2003; Sugrue and Day 2002; Tatto 2000).

Conclusion

In a recently published book Sugrue and Day (2002) argue the case that, in a dynamic and demanding international climate, business as usual for schools and teachers for most countries of the North and the South is no longer an option.

Consistent and increasing pressure on teachers, school leaders, administrators, policy-makers and researchers to construct new understandings, insights and practices to bring about transformations in the schools as organizations while simultaneously inventing more appropriate, efficient and effective approaches to teaching and learning consonant with individual needs, national aspirations and economic competitiveness....increasing pressure on teachers to be accountable not only for attainment and achievement of their students but also for the ways in which they teach.....the central message internationally is ...that business as usual for schools and teachers is no longer an adequate response to the rapidly changing landscape (Sugrue and Day 2002, p. xv).

This quotation encapsulates present concerns just as the points made throughout this paper suggest critical and urgent areas for change in promoting the improved quality and effectiveness of teachers and teaching.

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